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What Shall Prevent Me? Even Me . . . From Full Participation in the Kingdom?

Claire Davidson-Frederick

Claire preached this sermon at the 2016 Pepperdine Bible Lectures.

Acts 8.26–39: Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was a man, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

I was ten years old and the 6 p.m. Sunday evening service was just about to begin at the Lebanon Road Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee. It was the fifth Sunday of the month, and sometimes on those particular evenings, it was our practice to have a night of nothing but congregational singing “where anyone who wanted to, could get up and lead a song.” When they said anyone, I naturally thought that included me. I had been baptized after all. I had been taking piano lessons for the past three years, I could read shape notes, and I had a deep love for God and all things musical. I had memorized just about every song in our hymnal complete with its back page insert of 728B “Our God He is Alive.” I loved the call and response rhythm of that song and I was fairly certain that it would be the first one we’d sing on Judgment Day after we all got to heaven.

When it came time to volunteer to lead, my little hand shot up in the air and I had my finger on the page ready to commence. But my mother, horrified at the attention I had drawn to our red velvet pew, put her hand on top of mine and pushed it back down to the seat. “You can’t do that; you’re a girl,” she whispered in that hot breathy voice that leaves moisture on the inside of your ear canal and that I’m sure every church kid has felt at some point growing up. My face turned red and I swallowed hard to keep the lump in my throat from turning into real tears. *I had been prevented.*

I wonder if the Ethiopian eunuch experienced something like this upon his arrival at the temple in Jerusalem. Eager to offer his spiritual service of worship, he stepped out of his chariot, onto the temple mound, looking up at this beautiful holy building. Hungry for spiritual community, he was desperately seeking to understand where and how he fit into God’s world. You all know what a eunuch is, right? This is a person who began life as a male with all the requisite parts—but prior to puberty, had undergone castration. If performed early enough, this procedure had major hormonal consequences. Often this was done without the child’s consent in order that he might grow up and serve some governmental or social function. We don’t know if the eunuch chose to be “differently gendered” or if it was chosen for him.

Eunuchs were often assigned the task of assisting royal women or guarding the royal harem. This one served Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, as treasurer during one of the most prosperous times in the ancient history of the kingdom of Cush.

Because they could not procreate, eunuchs were not a threat to the sovereign’s rule. They could not establish a competing dynasty. But their status as eunuchs also made them vulnerable to violence. They could easily be replaced or killed without repercussion because they had no sons to avenge their name.

And because they were not quite male and not quite female, they were seen as completely *other*. They were spiritually *unclean* according to the laws of the people of Israel.

This eunuch had been a follower of Yahweh for some time now and it would have cost him a small fortune to make the expensive and long pilgrimage all the way from the Nile River Valley to the holy city of Jerusalem to honor God. Being a high-level official in his country, he was probably used to a certain amount of access and privilege, and did not foresee any problems getting into the temple. Reasonably wealthy, he could even afford to buy and the merchants were happy to sell him (perhaps as a souvenir) a beautiful, handmade scroll of the book of Isaiah.

But if he had only had in his possession a scroll of the book of Deuteronomy, the eunuch would’ve been saved a lot of trouble. Because in that book, it clearly states, according to the Law of Moses, that eunuchs are expressly forbidden from entering the temple or assembly of the Lord (Deut 23.1). *Forbidden from entering. Prevented!*

You see, the temple was segregated by tribe, by race, and by gender. The Holy Place was for the Levitical priesthood only. The inner court was for Jewish men only. The next court was for Jewish women only. The outer court, the one where Jesus taught and where the first Christians met, was for the rest, for the leftovers, for the unclean and the un-gendered.

Full of hope and expectation, the eunuch might have made it inside the court of the Gentiles, but no further. He is politely shown the door and prevented from entering the worshiping company of the spiritually elite.

Like me, the little girl who wanted to offer her song to God, the eunuch had learned about Israel’s God and had grown to love Israel’s God, and maybe he even believed, despite his transgressive gender and racial status, that *he too was made in the image of God*. But on this particular occasion, he was told in no uncertain terms, that his service and devotion to God could only go so far. The boundaries had been drawn. “Your full participation in this religion stops right here, pal.” *Prevented.*

Well, if he had to leave on that note, I’m glad he went back to Ethiopia with Isaiah as his take-home reading. Because in that book, instead of hearing a sad song of exclusion, he hears a symphony of hope from a God who promises “peace to those who are far off and to those who are near” (Isa 57.19). The eunuch catches a prophetic vision of a time (Still to come? he wonders), when God’s house will be called a “house of prayer for all nations.” He wonders when that time will be—when the walls and inner partitions of the temple

will no longer separate and distinguish worshippers according to Jew/Gentile, clean/unclean, male/female, eunuch/other.

Fast forward to Philip, the evangelist. You gotta love Philip. I love Philip because in the book of Acts, Luke tells us that he has not one, not two, not three, but FOUR prophesying daughters who are always flying off at the mouth—but, unlike my mother, Philip does nothing to quiet them. In fact he may be quite proud of them. Luke doesn't say.

But I believe at this point, Philip knows a thing or two about being an outcast himself, because if we go back and read earlier in Acts chapter 8, we discover that Philip has just been run out of Jerusalem due to the great persecution (Acts 8.1) that has broken out against the church. Philip is no longer a welcome guest at the temple either. He too is now excluded and is existing on the margins.

Following the promptings of an angel, Philip travels south along the road—the desert road—that leads to Gaza. And it is there that he sees this royally dressed, beautiful black man, skin so smooth and shiny and hairless because of the lack of testosterone. His gender is questionable. His race, uncertain. He is doubly *other*. Twice *unclean*. But if Philip has any hesitation in his Jewish gut at all about coming near this person, Luke doesn't record it. No, what we do read is the Spirit of God urging Philip to “join himself” to this man, and Philip does not resist.

We can assume that the kingdom of God in Christ has already *broken in* and *broken down* Philip's previously held categories of sectarian thought. After all he's just finished a preaching tour among Samaritans, for goodness sakes! (Acts 8.5–8)

So when the Spirit tells Philip to go, he doesn't just go, he *runs* headlong into the company of a brother who is doubly other. Jogging alongside the chariot, Philip shouts, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The way the question is phrased in the Greek, he is expecting a negative answer and he receives it. The eunuch responds, “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” So he invites Philip to come up and sit for a while in the cool shade of his chariot, a gracious act of hospitality from a man who's been excluded to an apostle on the run. You see, we all need a *beloved community*; we all need someone, anyone who's not afraid to wrestle with us (even in our differences), as we attempt to discern God's word and God's will for our lives.

And in that act of coming together, they create a “fellowship of differenters” to quote Scot McKnight. The chariot is transformed into a new type of church, and as Philip steps through the door of that church, he *preaches* peace and *he is the recipient of peace* from one that was far off to one who is near. *Isaiah is already coming true*.

I wonder what it was about Isaiah 53 that resonated with the eunuch? Could he see himself and his story in this Suffering Servant text that is most clearly fulfilled in the life and death of Christ? It says things like “he was despised and rejected by others,” “a man of suffering,” “acquainted with grief,” “humiliated,” “like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,” and on and on and on. . . . The eunuch can relate. He's been humiliated. The words evoked something in him. Had the eunuch been but a young lamb himself when they took the knife to him? He asks Philip, “Who is this scripture about? Who was rejected? Was it the prophet or someone else?”

You see there were only two members in that Holy Rolling Apostolic Gospel Church of the Ethiopian Chariot on the Road to Gaza, but **both** members could relate to rejection. So Philip begins right there, right there . . . and explains the story of Jesus, a Savior who was rejected by his people. How his life was taken away from the earth. How his death is redemptive. How he reconciles all people to God and to one another. Philip talks resurrection. He preaches new creation and the truth that in Jesus Christ all are one.

Maybe they keep on reading Isaiah. There's some holy irony here as they travel through this book and as they travel along this hot, dry, dusty road. By now the eunuch has already heard God's promises to make “streams in the desert” where there had been none, to “do a new thing” so that the “former things can be forgotten,” and to make a way where the way had previously been blocked or prevented (Isa. 43.19). And finally the eunuch hears the sweet promise of Isaiah 56.3b–5: “Let not the eunuch say, ‘. . . I am a dry tree.’” (Which is sort of like saying, “I ain't got nothing to give, no way to be fruitful.” Have mercy, friends, we all got something to offer one another.) “For thus says the Lord: ‘To the eunuch who keeps my Sabbaths . . . and

who holds fast to my covenant, *I will give*, within my house and within my walls, *a place and a name . . .*“ [emphasis added]. Again, “*I will give [him] a place and a name* better than sons and daughters; I will give [him] an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

You see, in the congregation of my youth, *there was no place for me* to offer my gift in worship, the gift of a song, and that hurt, friends—that was painful. In Jerusalem, *there had been no place for the eunuch* except for a Rosa Parks back-of-the-bus-type experience.

But now, on this dusty desert highway, having felt like a dry tree his whole life, the eunuch suddenly looks up and sees his *stream in the desert* (Isa 35.6). Here is water! Here is *a way to the Way* (Isa 35.8). Here is his *new thing*. And interrupting Philip, he asks, “*What shall prevent* me from being baptized?” And although the earliest manuscripts do not record Philip’s answer, we can imagine that Philip, smiling, mouths a single word: “Nothing.”

Nothing and no one shall prevent you if you have faith. And in that moment, the gospel was proclaimed to him and to every other person who has ever been prevented from living fully into the kingdom of God. But friends, who are we preventing today from full access in our communities of faith?

- Do we hinder people from pouring themselves fully into the mission of God by giving them subtle messages that we can’t use *your kind*?
- Do we divide and partition people out with walls of legalism, sectarianism, and social injustice?
- Is Sunday morning at 10 o’clock still the most racially segregated hour of your week?
- Do we still (in 2016!) prevent girls and women from speaking or leading in worship and using their gifts for public ministry?
- Do we tell the couple who is living together but not yet married, “Hey, y’all, clean up your act; then you can come on in here and be a part of what we’re doing.”
(Listen, I’m not condoning sin, but the truth is we’re *all sinners*, and we can’t speak into anybody’s life until we let them through the door and meet them where they are and work on establishing some kind of a spiritual relationship with them.)
- Do we prevent the alcoholic and frequently-out-of-work man from serving communion because the cigarette smell on his clothes is so strong, it’ll knock you over?
- Do we tell the young woman who is coming out with her sexual identity that she can no longer volunteer in the children’s ministry because we’re not sure she can be trusted around our kids (even though she’s grown up at this church and we’ve known her all of her life?!?)
- Do we ask people to check parts of themselves at the door and culturally commute in order to fit into *our particular brand* of Christianity?

What is there to prevent *anyone* from being fully included in the family of God (warts and all), where we can navigate and, dare I say, celebrate our differences together? When the answer to this question is firmly and finally “Nothing,” you’ve got the gospel. You’ve got the good news of a God who so loved the world that he wants all his children to be one in him. Then and only then can we go on our way, rejoicing.

Amen.

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